

Is North American Regionalism Less Politicized than European Integration? Evidence from Focus Groups

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Abstract: The politicization of regional governance has not been systematically studied in a comparative fashion. This paper compares well established findings about the politicization of European integration to insights, gained from focus groups, about the politicization of North American regionalism. The study suggests that, contrary to what one might infer from the existing, largely EU-focused literature, North American regionalism is not completely non-politicized. However, politicization of regional governance in North America takes a different shape than politicization of European integration; it is driven not by regional institutions with decision-making authority, but by (perceived) regional policy interdependencies.

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Introduction

Institutions, processes, and outcomes of regional governance are often portrayed as being neither “legitimate” nor “illegitimate” in the eyes of the citizens, but simply “a-legitimate” (Steffek 2007, 190) – so remote from people’s day-to-day political experiences that they are not seen as being in need of popular legitimation. This changes when regional governance becomes “politicized”, meaning that citizens gain awareness of its political significance, begin to develop opinions about it, and treat it as salient in their political discourses and activities. The European Union (EU) is widely cited as an example of a regional organization that has experienced this kind of politicization. Beginning with the debates about the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s, the “permissive consensus” in the European population on EU-related issues has gradually weakened, and EU institutions are increasingly faced with explicit challenges to their legitimacy.

As a result, the politicization of the EU, and its consequences for the future of European integration, have become major topics of scholarly debate in EU Studies (de Wilde 2011; Hooghe and Marks 2012). However, this debate has remained largely parochial: With few exceptions (e.g., Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012), research on the politicization of the EU has mainly taken the form of single case studies that do not relate the European experience to other examples of regional or global governance. The explanations that have been developed to account for politicization usually point to the exceptional level of *political authority* exercised by the EU – its uniquely broad policy portfolio, strong supranational institutions, and far-reaching rule-making and adjudicative powers – as underlying cause of the development, but also stress the importance of *situational factors* such as political party strategies, media reporting, or trigger events like major crises or referendums as crucial mobilizing devices (Hooghe and Marks 2009; de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Statham and Trenz 2012). Yet these explanations, intuitively plausible

as they might be, have not been systematically tested in research on other cases of regional or global governance. The assumption that the EU is more politicized than other regional organizations likewise remains empirically unproven.

Is politicization of regional governance an EU-specific phenomenon, or does it occur elsewhere as well? What exactly is the relationship between the institutional characteristics of regional decision-making and the ways in which it becomes politicized? Comparative research is essential to answer these questions. In this paper, we seek to make a contribution to this emerging research agenda by comparing politicization in the EU to politicization affecting North American regionalism. We thus examine two strikingly different cases of regional governance (Sbragia 2001; Clarkson 2008). North American integration remains narrow in terms of policy scope, weak in terms of institutions, and limited in its rule-making and adjudicative powers. Its main achievement, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), establishes a free trade area with national treatment rules for investment – not an EU-like Single Market. NAFTA remains firmly intergovernmental and possesses no supranational institutions; its Secretariat consists of three separate segments housed in the trade departments of the member states, and its Free Trade Commission is nothing more than the periodic get-together of national trade ministers. NAFTA institutions are not engaged in legislation, and while there are procedures for the binding adjudication of conflicts over treaty rules, these are affected by significant compliance problems, especially on the part of the United States (US). At least in recent years, NAFTA has also played a fairly limited role in political party and media discourse; for instance, the agreement was not mentioned in the electoral platform of either of the main US parties in the 2012 election. In short, based on the EU-related academic debate, North American regionalism represents an unlikely case for politicization.

On the other hand, non-politicization of North American regionalism should not be treated as a forgone conclusion. After all, in spite of its institutional weakness, steps towards regional integration in North America have had clear policy impacts: NAFTA has led to an intensification of economic interactions between the three member states, strengthened investor rights, and contributed to broader shifts in economic policy in both Canada and Mexico, away from strategies of import substitution industrialization and towards neoliberalism (Clarkson 2008; Capling and Nossal 2009). In addition, the bilateral relationships between the US and Canada on the one hand and the US and Mexico on the other remain politically important, and have a major influence on a large number of policy fields, from border security to immigration, energy, and drugs. The question is whether these policy impacts – in spite of weak trilateral institutions – are reflected in a politicization of North American regional governance.

To answer this question, our paper proceeds in four steps. We begin with some conceptual considerations on politicization; this section develops an understanding of politicization that is more differentiated – and hence more suitable for comparative research – than the one-dimensional definitions often employed in the EU-related literature. In a second step, we discuss methods of politicization research; this section explains why discourse-analytical approaches are essential to map when and how politicization is occurring, and justifies the use of focus groups as a device to understand politicization among ordinary citizens. In third step, we give a short overview of politicization tendencies in the EU, based on previous research, which will serve as a comparative benchmark for our more detailed analysis of North American regionalism. Finally, the fourth section turns to North America; it shows that regional governance here has not remained un-politicized, but that there are characteristic differences in

politicization patterns between Europe and North America, as well as between individual countries. We conclude with some general insights on the comparative study of politicization.

Conceptualizing politicization: The need for differentiation

In spite of the recent popularity of the concept in the literature, there is no universally accepted definition or measurement of politicization. The concept of politicization that we will apply in this paper is based on an understanding of politics as the cooperative or conflictive attempt to make collectively binding decisions for a defined group of people. An issue is politicized, according to this definition, if it is raised within such a group as a relevant object of, or factor in, the collective decision-making process (Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012, 73-74). This implies that the politicization of regional governance is best studied as a *discursive phenomenon*: It is not sufficient that actors are aware of regional institutions and processes; what is required is rather that these become *salient* in political communication that seeks to influence – or responds to – collective decision making (Green-Pedersen 2012).

This definition implies that regional governance can be politicized in different fashions, depending on which of its features are addressed in political discourse, and how this is done. Existing conceptions of politicization have often failed to capture this multifaceted character of politicization, by treating it in a dichotomous fashion, as a phenomenon that is either present or absent in a particular constellation (Hooghe and Marks 2009), or by speaking in vague terms about various “extents” or “degrees” of politicization (Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012, 95-99). Contrary to such conceptualizations, our study treats politicization as a multidimensional phenomenon. Two dimensions are highlighted in this study (see also Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013):

- (1) *Aspects of regional governance* that become politically salient. Regional governance arrangements are internally complex and differ markedly from each other; it would therefore be simplistic to analyze them as one homogeneous object of politicization. Our study differentiates between three aspects of regional governance that may become politicized: (a) *regional organization* as such, meaning the very existence of a regional political level and one's own country's membership in it; (b) *regional institutions*, meaning the composition and powers of regional bodies and the processes in which regional decisions are made; and (c) *regional policies*, a category that encompasses both joint decisions made at the regional level and decisions made within the member states on domestic implications of regionalism (e.g., budget cuts in an EU state in response to Eurozone requirements). These categories are important for interpreting the substantive scope of politicization, for instance, the degree to which the institutional foundations of regional governance are (or are not) contested.
- (2) *Types of political arguments* made about regional governance. If we find that certain aspects of regionalism are politicized, it becomes important to analyze how they are addressed. This study focuses in particular on the kinds of evaluative arguments about regional governance, and their justification; it distinguishes between (a) *pragmatic arguments* that focus on concrete policy outcomes (e.g., implications for economic well-being), (b) *moral arguments* that assess regional governance based on universal standards of justice and good governance (e.g., human rights, democracy), and (c) *ethical arguments* that relate regional integration to the values of specific political communities (e.g., national identities). These categories, derived from discourse ethics (Habermas 1993, 1-17; for earlier applications to the EU, see Sjørnsen 2002; Wendler 2014), are helpful for assessing the nature of political conflict in debates about regional governance. While conflicts over policy outcomes are often amenable

to compromise, ideological conflicts over different moral standards and especially conflicts in which identities are at stake may prove much more difficult to resolve.

Operationalizing politicization: A focus on citizen discourses

Political discourse about regional governance may occur in a variety of arenas, each characterized by the presence of specific actors. These include (a) *institutional arenas* at the core of the political system, which are populated by full-time politicians (e.g., parliaments); (b) *intermediary arenas* linking political decision-making processes to the broader citizenry, which are dominated by participants with a strong – and often professional – interest in politics (e.g., political parties, interest groups, or the media); and (c) *citizen arenas* in which laypeople communicate about politics (e.g., in discussions with friends).

It is generally (and quite plausibly) assumed that politicization of regional or global institutions spreads outward from the centre of the political system, first towards intermediary and then towards citizen arenas (Schmitter 1969; Barker 2003). Much of the empirical literature on politicization, especially in the EU context, focuses on intermediary structures – manifestos and communicated positions of political parties (Benoit and Laver 2006; Wüst and Schmitt 2007; Kriesi et al. 2008), mobilization attempts by organized civil society (Imig 2004; Berkhout and Lowery 2010; Greenwood 2011), news media reporting (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Risse 2010; Statham and Trenz 2012), and the like. However, the ultimate – and most profound – indication that regional governance has achieved a state of political saliency would be politicization in citizen arenas, indicating that regional institutions and processes have become an acknowledged part of the political landscape even for laypeople.

In this paper, we hence focus on citizen arenas. Given the discursive character of politicization, we approach this research with discourse analytical methods. To be sure, more established approaches of public opinion research are also able to shed light on citizen attitudes towards various aspects of regional governance, and there are good studies that attempt to do this for both Europe (e.g., Hooghe and Marks 2005; McLaren 2006; van der Eijk and Franklin 2007) and North America (e.g., Bennett 2004; Merolla et al. 2005; White and Nevitte 2008). However, as an indicator of politicization, public opinion data has a number of weaknesses. A first problem is that it does not provide good insights into the politicization of *policy issues*, as questions about currently debated policies are not systematically included in most surveys. A second problem is more fundamental: It has to do with the limited capacity of public opinion research in measuring political saliency (Zaller 1992, 76-96). If citizens are asked in a survey about various aspects of regional governance, they might be able to come up with an opinion, but the survey will not reveal how intensely they care about the issue,¹ and how closely the response options correspond to the way in which they would conceive of the topic outside of the survey encounter.

For this reason, qualitative methods that can better reflect the discursive character of politicization – such as semi-structured interviews or group discussions – should be considered an essential complement to public opinion studies in research about politicization in the citizen arena. Such methods have recently gained popularity in EU-related research (e.g., Díez Medrano 2003; Favell 2008; Gaxie, Hubé and Rowell 2011; White 2011; Duchesne et al. 2013). In this paper, we specifically advocate the use of focus groups. Even though focus groups are not a

¹ Survey researchers may try to get around this problem by asking respondents to identify the most pressing political problems of the day. This procedure makes it possible to assess how important “the EU” or “NAFTA” are compared to other issues (Kriesi et al. 2008; Green-Pedersen 2012), but it does not allow for a differentiated assessment of the saliency of various aspects of regional integration.

“natural” setting for political discourse (Morgan 1997), and the discussions within them provide no more than an approximation to laypeople’s day-to-day communication, they constitute the most feasible method for generating insights into “the process of people constructing and negotiating shared meaning, using their natural vocabulary” (Gamson 1992, 17). Being a qualitative procedure, they cannot claim to rival public opinion studies in producing representative results that could easily be generalized. They do, however, provide two kinds of added value: First, they make it possible to assess the saliency of various aspects of regional governance in a setting that is only loosely structured by the researcher and gives more room to the issues raised by the participants themselves; and second, they allow for an inductive study of the participants’ arguments about – and evaluations of – regional governance that can pay close attention to the language that is employed and the interactive dynamics that unfold.

In this paper, we analyze four focus groups conducted in December 2011 in the US and Canada to discuss North American regionalism, and compare them to the result of a previous study of European integration – based on 16 focus groups held in December 2010 in Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, and Ireland – that used the same conceptual and methodological framework (Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013). Our focus groups were composed of eight to eleven participants; they were held in the capital cities of each country. Participants were recruited, under our supervision, by local public opinion research firms, using their existing panels.² In each country, half of our groups were composed of citizens with higher-than-average levels of income and education, while the other half consisted of citizens with lower-than-

² In Europe, we cooperated with *WorldOne Research* (London), *The Grafton Suite* (Dublin), *items Marktforschung* (Berlin), and *meinungsraum.at* (Vienna). In North America, our partners were *Metro Research Services* (Alexandria, VA) and *Opinion Search* (Ottawa).

average income and education. All groups were mixed with respect to other demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, or ethnic background).

Participants in our groups were first asked a number of open questions that did not contain any cues related to regional governance. These questions related to recent political events and developments that they had followed and discussed in their social environments, about their views on the ongoing financial and economic crisis in Europe and North America, and – in the United States and Canada – about political events in the two other NAFTA states. These questions were designed to find out whether regional issues – or to the regional dimension of global and multilevel issues such as the financial market crisis – were mentioned spontaneously. In later rounds of questioning, participants were asked explicitly about their country's membership in the EU or NAFTA, about the role, institutions and policies of the two organizations, and about regional identities (see interview guide in the Appendix).

Our focus groups enable us to discern similarities and differences of politicization patterns both between countries and across the two regional projects. Based on the conceptual framework developed above, we will pay particular attention to the *saliency of various aspects of regional governance* and to the *kinds of arguments and evaluations* made about them. Saliency, in this context, is assessed in reference to the dynamics of the group discussions: A regional issue is defined as highly salient if it generated a lively debate in which multiple participants explicitly reacted to each other even without the moderator's involvement. An issue is defined as moderately salient if most participants were able to develop a position, but mainly responded to questions, with limited discursive interaction. Lastly, an issue is defined as being of low saliency if, even after prompting, participants avoided addressing it, either directly by declaring their lack of interest or competence, or indirectly by moving on to another topic. Arguments and

evaluations made about regional governance are analyzed based on the distinction between pragmatic, moral, and ethical arguments developed above and then further fleshed out in an analytic narrative.

Setting a benchmark: Politicization of European integration

Before we turn to a detailed analysis of our North American focus groups, it makes sense to summarize the main trends in the politicization of European integration, which can serve as a benchmark to make sense of our North American findings. This summary will be based on our own focus group study (Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013), but also on evidence from other qualitative research which corroborates our results (especially Gaxie, Hubé and Rowell 2011; White 2011; Duchesne et al. 2013). Given the limited statistical representativeness of qualitative research, such correspondence between various studies provides the best confirmation that the findings of any one qualitative study are not just driven by idiosyncratic factors, such as the composition of a particular focus group, but point to more general tendencies. There is now a sufficient density of qualitative studies on the EU to describe some fundamental patterns of politicization with a reasonably high level of confidence.

What this research shows is that European integration remains clearly less politicized than the exercise of decision-making authority in the member states. While for some citizens, the EU and its institutions have become an accepted part of the political landscape, the majority of Europeans – particularly (but by no means only) people of lower socio-economic and educational status – remain largely indifferent to the EU, do not follow its political processes on a regular basis, and are reluctant to express opinions about it. They are aware of the EU and its

political significance, but the salience of EU-related issues remains moderate when they engage in discourses and practices of democratic citizenship.

When debates about European integration are explicitly triggered in focus groups, discussions tend to remain at a very high level of abstraction. Using the categories developed above, we can say that regional organization (the existence of the EU and one's country's membership) and regional institutions (the constitutional structure of the EU) are more salient than regional policies. In debates about *regional organization*, the organizational image conveyed of the EU is overwhelmingly negative, and dominated by connotations such as bureaucracy, inefficiency, remoteness, and a tendency to over-regulate. However, this does not keep Europeans from controversially debating the positive and negative implications of their country's membership, which are evaluated in a differentiated fashion. Arguments in favour of membership mainly make use of pragmatic justifications, pointing to concrete benefits of European integration to individuals, such as passport-free travel. Arguments critical of membership are more diverse in character; here pragmatic justifications (pointing, for instance, to the recent economic problems) are used alongside moral justifications (lack of democratic control, etc.) and especially ethical arguments (encroachment on national sovereignty and identity, etc.). The ways in which these arguments are framed are strongly influenced by the political, historical, and cultural contexts of various member states.

When citizens debate *regional institutions* in the EU context, discussions are shaped by low levels of knowledge about the EU's political system. Few citizens fully understand its complicated internal structure and policy-making processes. They often see this as a deficiency, one that contributes to a feeling of disenfranchisement when it comes to EU politics, and hence to the perception that the EU is deficient in terms of democratic legitimacy. In other words,

moral arguments play a significant role here, and they result almost exclusively in negative evaluations of the EU. There is a widespread perception that the EU could (and should) be more transparent; many citizens call for concrete remedies such as specific EU segments in TV newscasts or newspapers, the publication of information material in more accessible language, and explicit activities by EU politicians to explain the organization to the people. By contrast, there is considerable reluctance to embrace proposals for institutional reforms to make the EU more democratic (such as granting more powers to the European Parliament); this opposition reflects a general mistrust of EU institutions, but is also frequently justified based on ethical arguments that stress the incompatibility of stronger EU-level democracy with national sovereignty and identities.

Discussions among citizens about *regional policy* in Europe are clearly less structured than debates about regional organization or institutions. The great majority of citizens are not aware of the (often highly technical) policy issues that are debated at the EU level, whose saliency hence remains low. There are some instances in which domestic policy issues are discussed in a regional frame of reference, as issues that emerge as consequences of EU membership. The Eurozone financial crisis and its implication for national budgets is an obvious example; in our own focus groups, issues of migration from other EU countries – and strategies of dealing with it – were also frequently addressed in this way. When policy-related arguments are made, citizens usually resort to pragmatic justifications, but many of arguments also have a strong ethical component, especially in claims that EU policies undermine national autonomy.

While European integration hence remains a far cry from becoming comprehensively politicized in citizen arenas, we can conclude that a number of fundamental aspects of integration – especially the general character of the EU, the benefits and costs of EU membership

and the (lack of) democratic quality of EU institutions – have achieved moderate political saliency. By contrast, issues associated with the routine functioning of the EU’s political system, especially EU-level policy making, remain much less salient. With respect to the arguments raised in citizen debates, the most striking result of existing research is the relatively narrow range of pro-EU claims that are brought forward. While *critical* assessments of the EU make use of a variety of pragmatic, moral, and ethical justifications, arguments *in favour* of European integration primarily refer to the concrete personal benefits derived from the EU, especially its free movement policies.

Assessing politicization of North American regionalism

How do these tendencies compare to the way in which North American regionalism is (or is not) politicized? Our answer to this question remains tentative, not only because we conducted fewer focus groups in North America than in Europe, but also because there are no comparable studies that could be used to corroborate the main findings. Nevertheless, our focus groups strongly suggest a distinct pattern of politicization of North American regionalism that is different from the ways in which European integration is politicized. In a nutshell, what we find is that regional organization as such, as well as regional institutions and their qualities, only have a very low saliency in North America; however, policy issues of a regionalized nature are at least as salient as they are in the European case.

Regional organization

In the opening rounds of our focus groups, designed to track spontaneous references to regional governance, the EU as a regional organization was mentioned in one third of our European

groups. By contrast, not a single of our North American participants mentioned NAFTA or any other aspect of North American regional organization. In response to more targeted questions, the existence of NAFTA was acknowledged; however, in clear contrast to the EU, no clear organizational image of NAFTA emerged. While references to the EU elicited explicit (and usually negative) descriptions of the organization, references to NAFTA were immediately turned into discussions of its economic implications. Participants seemed to understand that NAFTA is (no more than) a free trade agreement; accordingly, it was assessed primarily based on its perceived economic impact, its costs and benefits for the country or individual citizens. In this context, both positive and negative arguments were framed exclusively in pragmatic terms, with no trace of the ethical and moral justifications that European integration evokes. The following exchange from one of our Washington groups provides an illustration:³

Bob: Well with NAFTA, it's like globalization across the three countries. You move stuff among the three countries so you go to the cheapest labour and resources to get whatever you need. The thing is we're such big consumers, the reason people don't like NAFTA is because we consume but we don't export.

Nick: Especially manufacturing states like Ohio, Michigan, Indiana – the Rust Belt as they are called... But for the rest of the country, my God, it's been a huge net plus. And we get all these fresh vegetables. [...]

Jim: Well, I don't know, is the verdict still out on NAFTA? Are we in the plus side of the league sheet – with NAFTA? Anybody know? We don't make anything anymore. [...]

Nick: China has been our big manufacturer.

³ All names in the focus group excerpts have been changed.

Jim: Sometimes, I think in the long-term, it may be better to pay more for a product and keep your citizens employed and paying taxes.

Oscar: Well, I mean the big companies think about how to drive profits and their main priorities are shareholders. [...]

Joanne: So your argument is that they're creating wealth, it's not necessarily...

Oscar: Yeah, it's not being distributed, and the thing is, a lot of economists, too, [...] they don't necessarily look at how technology has impacted the overall economy. They talk about job creation but they don't talk about how many jobs technology has taken away. I mean, think about the job of accounting today, you can do the job of what 30 accountants did 10 years ago.

Joanne: It's true.

Oscar: And those jobs aren't coming back. And they've not accounted for that in the projections and the job creation ideas and plans, and that's a huge problem. It's that our economists, our leaders aren't forward-thinking. [...]

Chris: If you look at individuals I think free trade is probably – it's what you care more about: Do you care about cheaper products, and do you care about having a job for yourself, or do you care about a fellow citizen, them having a job and paying a little more? Kind of what you alluded to, buying American products for a little more, versus buying cheaper goods from other countries.

A number of aspects are noteworthy about this exchange – and typical for discussions in the other North American focus groups. First, because economic realities were in the foreground, continental and *global* dynamics were regularly conflated in the discussions. Questions about North American regionalism often led to debates about globalization more generally. In both the US and Canada, NAFTA was widely viewed as a zero-sum game largely to the detriment of one's own country; especially the decline of manufacturing and alleged job losses to Mexico were decried in both countries, but also considered with a certain degree of fatalism precisely

because they were mostly perceived as developments of a much broader, global scope. Secondly, and entirely in line with this framing of the problem, responsibility for these negative developments was not primarily placed on NAFTA, but rather on national governments (their lack of long-term planning), corporate elites (their greed, their lack of national solidarity) and even of consumers (their consumption choices).

Comparing the Canadian and US groups, one needs to factor in another feature of NAFTA that participants were well aware of: the heterogeneity of its member states and its asymmetry in favour of the US. For Canadians, NAFTA and (alleged) US non-compliance with its rules, for instance in the softwood lumber dispute, was a source of frustration – and the fact that prices have not levelled out between the US and Canada a constant reminder of the fact that NAFTA does not fully live up to its economic promises. At the same time, there was a certain appreciation of the fact that NAFTA ensures at least some rule-guided access to the US market and some involvement of Canadian governments in trade and economic policy decisions that affect Canada. For the Americans, the self-perception as a superpower that can “go it alone” made any transfer of powers and responsibilities *prima facie* implausible. While any loss of sovereignty was opposed just as vividly as north of the border, albeit for the opposite reason, the plausibility of cooperating with Canada or Mexico to solve certain problems (e.g., related to trade, border security and drug enforcement) was not denied altogether. Whether NAFTA is the best arena for this cooperation, however, remained an open question.

Regional institutions

Unsurprisingly given the lack of discursive presence of NAFTA as regional organization, the institutions of North American regionalism were all but non-politicized in our focus groups.

Even in the high education/income groups, participants were unable to name concrete NAFTA rules or bodies. In many groups, the moderator's questions about such issues were met with embarrassed giggles from the group members, indicating that they were clearly out of their comfort zone. None of NAFTA's institutions or side agreements were mentioned spontaneously, and even when prompted people could only be brought to confess their lack of knowledge.

In contrast to our European focus groups, where such knowledge deficits were turned into an argument against the EU – framed in moral terms and accusing it of being non-transparent, remote, and removed from citizen participation – no equivalent *democratic legitimacy discourse* developed on North American regionalism: NAFTA (or other North American institutions) were simply not evaluated in a democratic frame of reference. The only trigger that would induce our North American groups to abandon their exclusively pragmatic framing of North American issues were suggestions about a further intensification of regional integration, which met with strong ethical, identity-based opposition in both the US and Canada. The following exchange from one of our Canadian groups provides an example:

Moderator: Could you imagine having North American institutions, say a North American parliament, something like that?

Michel: No.

Heather: No. Forget that. We would never become the 51st state. Never, ever, never.

Michel: Exactly. They'd just take us over and we'd be marching to their drums.

Diane: Or, as they say, take me out and shoot me now.

Heather: No kidding. We definitely don't want to become American.

In a similar fashion, participants in our US groups also expressed a strong preference for NAFTA as a loose intergovernmental regime – even as no more than the sum of two bilateral relationships, each focusing on different sets of policy issues. This identity-based opposition to further North American integration appeared more unconditional in our focus groups than identity-based arguments against further European integration, which are also widespread, but usually contested in the focus groups by participants who professed an identification with Europe in addition to their national identity. By contrast, North American identity constructions were almost completely absent in our Ottawa and Washington focus groups, and the great majority of participants defined themselves exclusively through their nationality.

Regional policy

The final category of politicization objects that we examine in this study relates to public policies, either ones that are decided at the regional level or ones that are decided domestically, but appear on the policy agenda as an implication of regionalization. The former, of course, play a much more important role in the EU than they do in North American regionalism. Still, a number of participants in our North American focus groups did raise high-profile policy controversies that hinged on NAFTA rules and their interpretation by arbitration panels, namely the disputes over softwood lumber (in the Ottawa groups) and Mexican trucks (in the Washington groups). Even more frequent than references to such NAFTA issues were references to regionalized policies decided via various forms of bilateral diplomacy between the NAFTA countries, such as rules for border security (a pertinent topic especially in Ottawa), anti-drug policies (prominent especially in Washington, with a view to Mexico), or natural resources (raised in both countries). The regional dimension of these issues was clearly acknowledged, but

more supranational forms of decision-making on them were explicitly rejected, as these were associated with fears of a loss of national sovereignty. This is also reflected in the arguments made about such policies, which usually had a pragmatic element, but also frequently made use of ethical justifications, pointing to identity concerns (“Can we keep Canadian water Canadian please?”).

In addition to such issues of regionalized (multilateral or bilateral) policy making, participants in our focus groups also discussed a number of domestic policy issues and controversies that had their origins in regional interconnections. The following exchange from one of our Washington groups about the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, heavily lobbied for by the Canadian government, provides an example:

Melissa: Not just the environmentalists [are] concerned [but also] South Dakota because of the aquifer, which is essential for the farming in South Dakota. And there are other routes for the pipeline, and South Dakota politicians...

James: There’s no good route for a pipeline, sorry. There’s no good route. [...] People don’t want it, people who can see what’s going on. [...]

Laura: Well, you know, I’m probably the minority one in here but I think it’s a good idea to have a pipeline. You know, we need the oil, you know, it would employ more people, you know...

Melissa: But you don’t have to necessarily build it across the aquifer, that’s the issue. [...]

Peggy: And we used to have tons of oil here. [...] I thought, growing up in Texas, we thought, you know, hey, it won’t go away.

Melissa: We’ll be energy-independent in a short period of time because of fracking [...]. So the likelihood, if we get this oil from Canada, whether it goes across that one path or any other path, [is] that all of this energy that is now in our country and Canada could make us pretty energy-independent in the next 10 to 20 years.

Neil: That would be good.

In our focus group discussions, other policy issues of this kind – decided at the domestic political level but appearing on the political agenda as a consequence of regionalization – included economic and fiscal policy (especially in Canada, where there was concern about potential spillovers from the US fiscal problems) and migration (especially in the US, where immigration from Mexico was discussed as a challenge). Yet while these issues undeniably have a regional dimension, they are clearly different in nature from the “domesticated” European issues that we encountered in our European focus groups. While in Europe, the EU was the reference point – the origin of the policy problem at hand – the North American discourses referred not to NAFTA or some other North American institution, but rather to one of the other NAFTA states. For Canadians, for instance, the US was presented as the source of potential economic difficulties; for Americans, Mexico was the source of undesirable immigration.

Policy-oriented debates about North American regionalism reflect, in this sense, the realities of a weakly institutionalized and exclusively intergovernmental governance structure that, in many respects, is not genuinely trilateral but consists of two bilateral relationships (US-Canada and US-Mexico). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that in the policy dimension, North American regionalism appears at least as politicized as European integration. This policy politicization in North America seems to be driven not by regional institutions and their authority, but by perceived interdependencies between the North American states. This translates into different patterns of politicization compared to the ones found in Europe, but not into a lesser degree of salience of policy issues of a regionalized nature.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined how regional governance is politicized among citizens of the “most different” regional regimes of Europe and North America. The politicization of European integration has been much discussed in the recent literature, but often on the basis of rather undifferentiated conceptual and methodological frameworks. Our own analysis of focus groups in four EU member states, as well as similar qualitative studies conducted in recent years, suggest a pattern of politicization that can be described as *polity-oriented*: The most salient aspects of regional governance in Europe, in the eyes of the citizens, are the basic nature and character of the EU as a regional organization, the benefits and cost of membership, and the difficulties of understanding and influencing EU institutions. This discourse generates substantial legitimacy challenges for European integration, which are exacerbated by the fact that citizens seem to be familiar with only a very narrow range of (largely pragmatic) pro-EU arguments, while moral and ethical concerns usually drive EU-critical assessments.

North American regionalism, contrary to what one might expect based on the EU-related literature, did not appear in our study as completely non-politicized. However, those politicization tendencies that we did identify here were largely *policy-oriented*,⁴ and triggered not by strong regional institutions, but by (perceived) transnational policy interdependencies.

⁴ The terms “polity politicization” and “policy politicization” are also used by Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt (2012, 98). For them, “polity politicization” denotes the protest of citizens against international organizations that they perceive as illegitimate, while “policy politicization” refers to concrete policy proposals directed at international organizations that are perceived as legitimate. We use the terms polity- and policy-oriented politicization in a different fashion, which focuses on the aspects of regional integration that are salient. Both polity- and policy-oriented politicization can result in negative as well as positive legitimacy assessments; the thrust of evaluations is thus not conditional upon the type of reference object.

This type of politicization is neither firmly anchored at the regional level, nor clearly restricted to this (half-) continent: Discussions of regional policy issues often originated in the bilateral relations between just two of the NAFTA states; they also regularly turned into more general debates of globalization and international economic integration. Given this policy politicization, North American regionalism is not necessarily immune to challenges to its legitimacy. Yet due to the fact that North American regional organization as such, and its institutions, were only weakly politicized, and given that evaluative assessments were framed primarily in pragmatic terms, politicization in our focus groups did not trigger major legitimacy challenges. At the same time, our focus groups suggest that any further steps towards regional integration in North America would be met with significant, identity-oriented opposition.

These insights are valuable for understanding the causes and trajectories of politicization in regional governance arrangements. In contrast to the widespread assumption in the EU Studies literature, our research suggests that the strength of regional decision-making authority, while clearly shaping patterns of politicization, is not the only driving force of politicization processes. In North America, those politicization tendencies that could be observed largely originated from regional policy interdependencies, even in the absence of strong regional institutions. Furthermore, and in addition to the broad differences between the two regional projects described above, our study also highlights distinct national patterns within each continent. Structural factors such as a country's size and economic strength, deeply entrenched ideas such as constructions of national sovereignty and identity, as well as more fluent variables such as current economic performance all proved to be relevant for how European or North American regionalism was politicized in a specific context. Politicization research is still a long way from understanding the influence of all of these factors, let alone integrating them in a comprehensive

causal model. What this paper has shown, however, is that comparative research is indispensable for providing the building blocks of such as model.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Introductory remarks:

- Introduction: Researcher at Carleton University (Canada)/University of Bremen (Germany), working on politics in Europe and North America
- Topic of today's discussion: How do ordinary people view recent political events and decisions?
- Objectives of group discussion: Natural conversation with relatively equal participation of everyone. If someone is very quiet throughout the discussion, a question might be explicitly addressed to him or her.
- Final remark: In talking about politics, two things are very normal: First, there will be fields about which you do not know much – don't feel bad about this. Second, we should expect that people have different opinions. Please don't hesitate to voice disagreement, but do so in a respectful way.
- Ask all participants to briefly introduce themselves

1. As I mentioned, I am interested in your evaluation of recent political developments, events, and decisions. In a first step, could you please tell me: Which political issues have you discussed with friends or family recently, and what positions did you state in these discussions?

Probe: One recent major political issue has been the economic and financial market crisis, which has preoccupied governments and citizens since 2008. Do you think it has been handled well by the politicians in charge?

2. (If not mentioned spontaneously) Have you recently discussed any political developments in the United States [Canadians], in Canada [Americans], in Mexico [both]? Which?
3. I would now like to learn about your views on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). To begin, could you please tell me: How has the existence of the North American Free Trade Agreement affected you, your family, or your friends?

Probe: How would you assess NAFTA's performance overall, or in specific fields?

4. What does the expression "North America" mean to you? Do you feel North American?

Probe: Are there things that North Americans have in common? Do you think you have more in common with other North Americans than with citizens of other Western countries? How do you feel about Mexico being a part of the North American Free Trade Agreement? Is Mexico a North American nation just like the United States and Canada?

5. Returning to NAFTA, have you heard about any of its institutions and activities? What do you think about them?

Probe: Have you heard about the NAFTA Secretariat, the Commission for Labour Cooperation, or the Commission for Environmental Cooperation? Have you heard about the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America? Are you aware of any other North America-wide institutions, such as the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD)? Which? [ask one by one]

Probe: Did you hear about any of the so-called North American Leaders' Summits that took place in recent years, such as the Guadalajara Summit in August 2009? How do you feel about such meetings of the US and Mexican Presidents with the Canadian Prime Minister?

6. In general, do you think it would be a good thing to have certain political decisions made at the North American level, by joint North American institutions? What kind of joint institutions, if any, should exist? Which policies, if any, should be formulated at the North American level, by NAFTA and other existing or newly established continental institutions? Which questions are better decided at other political levels of government? Why?

Probe (if not mentioned spontaneously): Would you favour more powers for NAFTA and its institutions in the following fields: social policy, foreign policy, immigration and border security, environment, monetary policy? Would you be in favour of a joint North American currency? [ask one by one]

Probe (if not mentioned spontaneously): Would you be in favour of a North American parliament, elected by the citizens of NAFTA member states (a North American government, a directly elected North American chief executive)? [ask one by one]

7. What should be the objectives for the further development of the North American Free Trade Agreement? How would you like it to look in 10 years?

Probe: Should the North American Free Trade Agreement develop further in the direction of a political union, such as the EU, or even in the direction of a federal democratic state, such as the United States or Canada themselves? Why (not)?

Probe: Should more member states (for example Central American or Caribbean states) be included in the North American Free Trade Agreement? (If in favour of more integration) Should Mexico be included in a North American Union?

8. In conclusion, I would like to briefly talk about North American and European politics in comparison. What are your thoughts about European integration, about the institutions and policies of the European Union?

Probe: Could the EU be a model for North America? If so, why? If not, why not?